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“Trust ME, I’m A Journalist”: Ethics And Journalism Education

It is no secret that journalism today is in a state of crisis, and that popular perceptions of the ethical standards of the media in general and journalists in particular are an important contributor to this situation. In any serious consideration of contemporary journalism, journalism ethics is centre stage and, for this reason, ethics is also central to journalism education. Yet, while there has been extensive debate and reflection with regard to journalism education generally, there has been surprisingly little serious examination of what journalism students are taught about ethics. This paper argues that a fundamental re-examination of the whole project of teaching journalism ethics is necessary if journalism educators are to meet what Stuart Adam has described as their primary responsibility to build, through scholarship and reflection, the language “that captures and expresses the experience of making, knowing and judging journalistic work and reflects a sense of responsibility and stewardship for its quality and standards” (Adam, 2001: 318).

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It is often forgotten that education is an ethical enterprise. Every decision regarding what to include or exclude from every course is value-laden, and as such has ethical implications. This applies as much to journalism education as any other field but, within journalism education, perhaps more to journalism ethics than any other area. Over the past two decades or so, most journalism programs around the world have introduced formal ethics components, either as discrete courses or as integrated components of a wider course dealing with, for example, ethics and media law. There have been many reasons for this but, in Australia, an important influence has been mounting public concern about ethical standards in many areas of public life, including the media. This concern has developed concomitantly with a growing awareness among educators that there is an ethical dimension at all stages in the journalistic process, from initial

decisions regarding what to report, through decisions about the gathering and processing of information, to decisions as to the way in which information is presented and to whom. In Australia and elsewhere pedagogical themes such as critical reflection have emerged which have also facilitated greater ethical consideration in higher education courses, along with immediate local influences such as program reviews, course evaluation reports and changes in teaching staff. Yet, although there has been extensive debate and reflection in many countries with regard to journalism education generally, there has been surprisingly little serious examination of what journalism students are taught about ethics. In Australia, for example, there have been no national studies, little reflective examination and little serious consideration of what the whole project of teaching journalism ethics is all about. This situation is in contrast with the wider project of journalism education, where the extended debate over purpose and direction has reached sufficient maturity that most would agree with Stuart Adam that “the coordinates of a good journalism education comprise, like the practice of journalism, a fundamental concern with ‘news’, and a corresponding concern with the acquisition of complex methods of knowing, representation and analysis” (Adam, 2001: 317).

Adam argues convincingly that the primary responsibility of journalism educators is to build, through scholarship and reflection, the language “that captures and expresses the experience of making, knowing and judging journalistic work and reflects a sense of responsibility and stewardship for its quality and standards”. He points out that the “pedagogical trick” is to bring students richly into contact with this voice so that they incorporate it as they build their expressive lives (Adam, 2001: 318). In his “impossibly tall” order for the ideal journalism curriculum, he argues for compulsory units in a range of areas, from constitutional law, political philosophy, democratic theory and empirical methods to “moral philosophy, social science and law to support journalism ethics, mass communication studies and journalism law” (Adam, 2001: 334).

Yet, even though these are all clearly related to achieving the fundamental goals of journalism education, there has been limited consideration of some of them, most notably journalism ethics. That this should be the case is in part a reflection of the way the subject is regarded by the industry. It is no secret that ethical issues are downgraded by many practitioners, an attitude epitomised by the recent observation from a British journalist that “Journalism is a cut-throat business, the unsavoury practicalities of which do not lend themselves to academic study”. (Blackhurst, 1997: 23) The reasons for this have been traced elsewhere (see, for example, Carey 1987, 1980). What is significant here is that there is no great pressure on journalism educators from the industry to which most of their

students aspire to seriously examine the ethical component of that education.

At the same time, journalism ethics has also received little academic attention, even from those working within the wider field of professional ethics. Partly because of on-going uncertainty as to whether journalism is a profession or a craft, the idea of professionalism in journalism is 'a vague and contradictory one' (Meadows, 2001: 73). Journalism is different from such standard professions as medicine or law – for example, journalists do not need to acquire a systematic body of knowledge in order to practise and do not enjoy anything like a doctor-patient or lawyer-client relationship with members of the public. One consequence of this is that journalism is not readily acknowledged as being central to professional ethics, and hence by far the greatest contribution to the study of journalism ethics has come not from academe but from reflective practitioners and former practitioners. These have generally taken an intensely pragmatic approach, which helps explain why 'neither journalists nor philosophers know how to talk about journalism ethics and, as a result, conversation on the topic is merely evasive and dispiriting' (Carey, 1987: 42). The net effect is that Merrill's observation that 'when we enter the area of journalistic ethics, we pass into a swamp of philosophical speculation where eerie mists of judgement hang low over a boggy terrain' (Merrill, 1974: 8) remains as valid today as when he made it almost three decades ago.

Issues

Given this somewhat depressing context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the teaching of journalism ethics is marked by considerable confusion and uncertainty. There is disagreement over which, if any, ethical theories are most appropriate for journalism, and disputation over the linkages between those theories and the major underlying debates in the field of journalism ethics. There are at least three of these debates, which Nordenstreng (1995) has summarised as the conflict between universal and particularist values, represented by the on-going dispute between those who are concerned to respect local conditions and values and those who argue that there are basic journalistic values which can be applied universally; the conflict between freedom and control, as embodied in the debate as to whether journalists' ethical standards should be subject to external regulation and enforcement or left to self-regulation; and the conflict between individualism and communitarianism, which focuses in particular on the extent to which journalists should be prepared to compromise their professional autonomy in favour of a commitment to considerations of community (Nordenstreng,

1995: 435-439). How one frames these debates and the theoretical understandings which inform this framing have direct implications for the way the subject is taught.

At the same time, other questions arise. Around the world, popular objections to journalistic behaviour fall into two broad categories – those associated with interviewing and reporting, and those associated with representation of these interviews and reportage when printed or broadcast. While ethics courses need to deal directly with the ethical dilemmas associated with these categories, there is more to it than this. Should such courses be issues-oriented or developed thematically? How are we to respond to wider issues such as ethical relativism? Is the widely used case-study approach the most effective way of teaching ethics? Are too many of the ethical dilemmas students are expected to contend with too heavily linked to senior management and too far removed from the sorts of dilemmas they will face as they begin their journalistic careers? And who should be teaching journalism ethics anyway?

While it could be argued that, in an ideal world, those teaching in this area should have studied philosophy or theology as well as journalism, and have extensive practical experience in journalism, in practice there are few such individuals available. Although experience as a practitioner is a requirement for securing employment in tertiary journalism programs in most countries, having formal academic qualifications in ethics is not, which means journalism ethics is taught primarily by former practitioners whose academic strengths lie in other areas. This means that the subject is being taught largely by individuals who draw on their experience of ethical decision-making “on the run” in newsrooms; what Callahan many years ago labelled as ‘competent amateurs’, meaning: “one who has a broad familiarity with the language, concepts, and characteristic modes of thinking of another discipline. To this familiarity should be added an understanding of the modes of analysis or the methodology of the other discipline” (Callahan, 1980: 78).

Although this situation has sometimes led to queries about the credibility of those doing the teaching, especially from the philosophers and theologians who traditionally taught ethics in the academy, the implications of having journalism ethics taught largely by such competent amateurs seem never to have been seriously investigated. While it might well be the case that an understanding of the “real world” settings in which most ethical decisions are made in journalism is of more significance than the academic insights of philosophy and theology, the point is that the investigations required to reach such conclusions have not been carried out.

Complicating the answers to such questions are wider ethical issues raised by the increasing corporatisation of journalism. Although the individual journalist is an essential unit of ethical agency, he or she doesn't operate in a vacuum (Richards, 1998). Most journalists are employees and, increasingly, employees of large companies or corporations, the primary aim of which is to maximise the return to shareholders. While journalists are ultimately responsible as individuals, it is as individuals in a setting where their powers and duties are at least in part defined by their role in the corporate organisation. Many, perhaps most, of the ethical dilemmas they face begin with the inherent conflict between the individual's role as a journalist and his or her employer's quest for profit (Richards, 2003). Just how should journalism educators respond to this situation?

As some students are quick to point out, there is also an ethical dimension to the contemporary university environment. In Australia, as in most countries, the tertiary sector has been subject to extreme change and tension in recent times, and this has at times raised serious ethical issues. How should journalism educators accommodate the gap between what is being taught in class and what is often perceived by their students as unethical decision-making within the wider university? Such matters range from plagiarism and assessment policies and procedures to the way staff respond to student needs, to institutional decisions about which courses will be funded and who will be employed to teach them. Meanwhile, ever present in the background, is the wider societal context and the various ethical themes residing there. For example, in Australia at present there are ethical implications associated with reduced government funding for universities and with the extent of government influence over the direction in which universities are heading.

Conclusion

Underlying the above discussion is the fundamental question of why we are teaching journalism ethics in the first place. Certainly, much of the practice of journalism can be described and analysed 'in terms of a set of concepts which are essentially ethical, terms like freedom, objectivity, truth, honesty, privacy' (Belsey and Chadwick, 1992: xi) but this is only part of the answer. And, while it might seem obvious that ethics is a necessary part of journalism education because students need to be equipped to deal with the sorts of dilemmas which will become an inescapable part of their lives when they enter the workforce, such responses require elaboration. In the words of one of the leading contributors to this field, those who teach journalism ethics are 'hoping to light a few candles to take some edge off the darkness' (Black, 2002:

30) by teaching their students “to recognise moral issues, develop analytical skills, tolerate – and resist – disagreement and ambiguity, stimulate the moral imagination, and elicit a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility” (Black, 2002: 5).

To this could be added encouraging students to understand that journalism is an ethical enterprise; teaching students to be reflexive; and helping students to be aware of their own ethical values and how these might affect professional decision-making. More contentiously, some educators also add that one of their objectives is to change – or, at least, “improve” – the values and attitudes of their students, arguing that such outcomes are vital if journalism’s ethical standards are ever to be advanced. Against this, others raise strong ethical objections to the idea of attempting to change students’ values, and point out that to expect classes which last a few hours a week for a semester or two to change attitudes and behaviours developed over a lifetime is an act of supreme optimism.

It is no secret that journalism today is in a state of crisis, nor that popular perceptions of the ethical standards of the media in general and journalists in particular are an important contributor to this situation. In any serious consideration of contemporary journalism, journalism ethics is centre stage and, for this reason, ethics is also central to journalism education. If those of us who teach journalism ethics are to succeed in engaging students with Stuart Adam’s “journalistic language”, we need to find answers to the questions raised above. In short, the time has come for those of us who have this responsibility to re-assess the venture upon which we are engaged. Where better to start than by re-examining what it is we are trying to do, why we are doing it, and how we are doing it? ■

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